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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 21 December 2017

[The Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 11:40]

General Question Time

Welfare Reform (Homelessness)

1. Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what impact United Kingdom Government welfare reform, as part of its austerity agenda, is having on homelessness in Scotland. (S5O-01604)

The Minister for Local Government and Housing (Kevin Stewart): The UK Government's welfare cuts have increased the financial pressures on households and have increased the risk of homelessness or hardship. We know from the National Audit Office report published in September that the UK Government did not effectively assess the impact of welfare reforms on homelessness, and a survey from Street Soccer that came out this week showed that a third of people believe that they or someone they know could be at risk of homelessness. Cuts in welfare spend in Scotland will reach £4 billion a year by the end of the decade, which will impact on some of the poorest and most vulnerable people in our society.

Every year, we spend more than £100 million to help relieve the worst impact of UK Government welfare cuts and to support those on low incomes. That includes mitigating the bedroom tax to help more than 70,000 households in Scotland to sustain their tenancies. We also support people in crisis through the Scottish welfare fund. We have strong homelessness rights in Scotland, and a focus on preventing homelessness. I would prefer it if we were able to use that £100 million to enable us to invest in our priorities, including tackling homelessness.

Ben Macpherson: Earlier this month, Presiding Officer, you and the Minister for Local Government and Housing, along with Angela Constance, the Cabinet Secretary for Communities, Social Security and Equalities, me and an inspirational 8,000 other people took part in the Social Bite sleep in the park initiative, to help end homelessness and rough sleeping in our country, and to help alleviate the difficulties that the UK Government's policies are causing for people. In order to support initiatives such as sleep in the park, and in contrast to the UK Government's policies, can the minister provide an update on the proactive and purposeful action that the Scottish

Government is taking to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping in Scotland in partnership with local authorities, the third sector and others?

Kevin Stewart: As Mr Macpherson knows, the Scottish Government established the homelessness and rough sleeping action group, which is a short-life action group involving the third sector, housing associations, academia and local authorities. I am pleased to say that, since the group was established in October, it has moved quickly to recommend actions to minimise rough sleeping this winter. Those actions will increase emergency accommodation and outreach provision for people who are at risk of rough sleeping, and will be crucial in supporting and protecting people this winter.

The Scottish Government accepted all of the group's recommendations and we are moving rapidly to implementation, backed with a total funding package of £328,000, including £262,000 from the Scottish Government and £66,000 from Social Bite, the Simon Community Scotland, Govan Law Centre and Crisis. We continue to work with local authorities and other partners through the homelessness prevention and strategy group and the regional housing options hubs, to support councils in the prevention of homelessness and the discharge of their duties towards homeless people.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Glasgow has had a higher rate of adults claiming out-of-work benefits than any other Scottish city, and it has a high rate of adults claiming incapacity benefit. Does the minister share my concerns about the roll-out of universal credit scheduled for Glasgow next year, given the impact on housing and the impact that we already know that universal credit has had on tenants?

Kevin Stewart: Yes, I share Ms McNeill's concerns. Many have warned the UK Government about the roll-out of universal credit, which, in my opinion, has been somewhat shambolic. I was pleased to see that the Church of Scotland has this week also criticised the UK Government for the roll-out of universal credit. On top of that, we have also seen the benefit cap, which has had a major impact on families right across Scotland and beyond. The UK Government should have a real rethink about its welfare reform policies and social security cuts, and end austerity so that we can protect the most vulnerable people in our society.

Children with Autism (Waiting Times)

2. Dean Lockhart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to reduce diagnostic waiting times for children with autism. (S5O-01605)

The Minister for Mental Health (Maureen Watt): Integration joint boards are responsible for the strategic planning and decision making for all services delegated to them, including diagnostic services for autistic people, in line with their statutory obligations and Scottish Government policy. Health and social care partnerships are responsible for the delivery of local services based on the planning decisions made by integration joint boards and are, therefore, responsible for the implementation of local autism strategies and action plans.

However, improving diagnostic services remains a Scottish Government priority for the Scottish strategy for autism. It is recognised that waiting times are too high across both child and adult diagnostic services and that is why the Scottish Government is investing in an improvement programme to work with health and social care partnerships to reduce waiting times for autism assessments.

Dean Lockhart: Last week, one of my constituents received confirmation that her 11-year-old son, who was first referred to the autism community assessment pathway in October 2016, will not have his first appointment until next year. The reason given is that the children's health service in Fife has been unable to recruit for any of its advertised posts. I am sure that the minister will agree that having to wait for more than a year and a half to see a specialist is unacceptable. Notwithstanding the steps that the minister has outlined, how can she provide assurance to my constituents that the specialists required will actually be recruited?

Maureen Watt: I am disappointed to hear of Dean Lockhart's constituent's case and that they have to wait so long for an autism diagnosis. It highlights to me the fragility of many of our mental health services across the country. We are investing more—we have invested £150 million extra in mental health services—and the health improvement teams are working with a range of health boards and social care partnerships across the country to make sure that in the future they have sustainable services.

Draft Budget 2018-19

3. Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how its draft budget will grow the Scottish economy. (S5O-01606)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Constitution (Derek Mackay): The draft budget delivers more than £4 billion of infrastructure, a 64 per cent uplift in the economy, jobs and fair work portfolio, a new £150 million building Scotland fund, procurement for a £600 million investment in our R100 programme, £2.4 billion in our enterprise

and skills bodies and the most attractive system of business rates in the United Kingdom. Those major investments will underpin our focus on innovation, infrastructure and investment, internationalisation and inclusive growth.

Murdo Fraser: I thank the cabinet secretary for his response and take the opportunity to wish him a very happy Christmas.

In the Finance and Constitution Committee meeting yesterday, we heard evidence from the Scottish Fiscal Commission about its forecast for Scottish economic growth over the next four years, which lags far behind the rest of the UK, as the cabinet secretary will know. Perhaps more worryingly, the forecast for productivity in Scotland also lags far behind the rest of the UK. What specific measures in the cabinet secretary's draft budget will deliver improvements in productivity?

Derek Mackay: I wish Murdo Fraser a very merry Christmas, and a happy new year when it comes, as well. I think that that is the nicest thing that he has ever said to me in the chamber. It is nice to see the festive season having its effect even on Murdo Fraser.

I do not have enough time in general questions to cover the whole range of actions that will make a difference to economic growth, but I am convinced that the investments that we are putting in place in creating the right competitive environment for businesses, supporting innovation and internationalisation, addressing skills issues and supporting businesses to upskill, grow and take advantage of digital potential will ensure that our economy performs more strongly. Of course the SFC forecasts are absolutely critical to Government, but a range of other forecasts were far more positive about Scotland's economic prospects.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): The cabinet secretary mentions the range of non-domestic rates reliefs that he has in place. Is it not the case that there is a lack of evidence about the effectiveness of that rather blunt approach and that we would be rather better off focusing such initiatives on those businesses that achieve some of the social and economic priorities of the Scottish Government, whether that be paying the real living wage, investing in skills or meeting the business pledge priorities?

Derek Mackay: I will be specific on one aspect of that. The Government has committed to undertake a review of the small business bonus scheme in order to ensure that we can maximise its economic and social benefits.

I think that it is true to say that the scheme has been a lifeline to our businesses and it has supported many communities, but we want to make sure that we can do even more with the

reliefs and the financial support that we provide to our business community.

Stroke Rehabilitation

4. Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how it ensures that multidisciplinary goal setting is in place for stroke patients as soon as possible as part of their rehabilitation. (S5O-01607)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Shona Robison): We expect health boards to take forward the actions in priority 7, “Transition to the community”, and priority 8, on “supported self management” and “Living with stroke”, in our “Stroke Improvement Plan—August 2014”, which includes an action for goal setting to ensure that the appropriate care is provided for individuals in need.

The Scottish stroke improvement team supports managed clinical networks to evaluate board performance and identify areas of concern, and it works with them to implement local action plans to improve the delivery of stroke care across Scotland. That support includes visiting all boards at least once a year to review stroke care with board representatives to assess performance, to highlight achievements and good practice and to formulate an improvement plan for areas of concern, where necessary.

Alexander Stewart: The “Scottish Stroke Improvement Programme—2017 report” shows that multidisciplinary goal setting has been fully implemented in only three health boards. Does the cabinet secretary agree that that is insufficient for stroke survivors and that they should not have to deal with a postcode lottery?

Shona Robison: We know that early assessment and the provision of rehabilitation through multidisciplinary working in the first few days following an acute stroke achieves the best outcomes for the person. In my initial answer, I referred to the assessment of boards’ performance and, more important, the improvement plans that they are then expected to take forward. We will ensure that that process continues in order that stroke services are improved in every board area.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): What information is available to people who have experienced a stroke to make them aware of the services that they should receive in the community?

Shona Robison: The Scottish Government continues to work with national health service boards and the third sector to ensure that stroke patients and their families have access to the right care and support.

Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland’s interactive self-management website, www.selfhelp4stroke.org, which is funded by the Scottish Government, can be used by anyone who has been affected by stroke. Stroke services have implemented, or are in the process of implementing, a person-centred approach that includes goal setting and the provision of a range of self-management approaches.

Waiting Times (NHS Grampian)

5. Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its work to reduce waiting times in NHS Grampian. (S5O-01608)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Shona Robison): The Scottish Government is working closely with colleagues in NHS Grampian to support improvements around key performance targets.

NHS Grampian has received more than £8 million this year to improve all parts of the patient pathway—that is, out-patient consultation, diagnostic tests and in-patient and day-case treatment. A number of initiatives are under way to support sustainable improvements, including additional theatre sessions being delivered across a range of specialties from January 2018. We have also allocated more than £1.3 million to NHS Grampian to support resilience across unscheduled care pathways over the winter.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: I wrote to the cabinet secretary some months ago about the case of my constituent who has been waiting almost a year for cardiac surgery. To her credit, the cabinet secretary agreed that that wait was unacceptable. However, we now know from the most recent figures that only 33 per cent of patients who are waiting for child and adolescent mental health services in Grampian are seen within the 18-week target. That is by far the worst record in Scotland, and it is far below the national figure of 73 per cent. Does the cabinet’s secretary agree that that, too, is unacceptable? Will she make clear the timeframe within which she expects waiting times in Grampian to reach the national waiting times targets?

Shona Robison: NHS Grampian is being supported to make improvements in waiting times across all specialties. Maureen Watt referred to mental health services in response to an earlier question, and we have a huge programme of work across CAMHS, including investment, more staffing and plans for each board to improve its waiting times. Some boards have further to travel in making those improvements, but we will continue to work with NHS Grampian and others to ensure that that happens.

Investment is hugely important, and we have made a commitment to fund the national health service going forward. If the Tory tax plans were followed in 2018-19, NHS Grampian would receive £49.5 million less than it will receive under our budget. Jamie Halcro Johnston might want to support our budget to ensure that NHS Grampian gets the support and resources that it requires.

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): Cold weather significantly increases the pressure on our accident and emergency departments. Will the cabinet secretary outline what additional steps have been taken to help winter planning and support people to transfer through the system over the winter months?

Shona Robison: The combination of flu-like illness, norovirus and orthopaedic trauma has caused significant pressures on not only A and E services but the Scottish Ambulance Service in response to the increase in the number of cases. We have invested £22.4 million this year—a record level in any year—to support unscheduled care and winter resilience across health and social care services. However, it is a challenging time. Winter is always challenging, but the past couple of weeks have been particularly challenging and I place on record my thanks to all the staff who are working so hard in those challenging circumstances.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): The cabinet secretary will be aware that the capacity issues in NHS Grampian are having an impact on patients in the islands. She will also be aware that NHS Orkney is considering developing relationships with other health boards to address the long waiting times. Will she ensure that NHS Orkney is able to redeploy the full amount of the resource that is currently paid to NHS Grampian to deliver services?

Shona Robison: I am happy to discuss that further with Liam McArthur. It is important that patients in NHS Orkney get access to prompt treatment. Traditionally, as Liam McArthur said, that has been provided by NHS Grampian, but we now have the Golden Jubilee national hospital, which provides a number of fantastic services for patients throughout Scotland. I am happy to write to Liam McArthur with further details but, if he wants to have a meeting to discuss the matter further, I am happy to sit down with him and do that.

Income Maximisation (Targets)

6. Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will set targets for income maximisation and help reduce the overall amount of benefits that go unclaimed. (S5O-01609)

The Minister for Social Security (Jeane Freeman): Income maximisation is a key element of the delivery plan under the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017, which we will publish in April 2018. Income targets are already at the heart of the act, and income maximisation will be an important element of the action that is taken.

We already fund a range of welfare advice services from the fairer Scotland budget to support people to maximise their income and to support the uptake of benefits. Over this parliamentary session, we will continue to deliver a programme of activity to increase the uptake of social security by encouraging people to exercise their rights and claim the benefits to which they are entitled. I am grateful to Citizens Advice Scotland and Young Scot for their engagement with us on that.

As the member knows, with Mr Rowley's support, we have discussed a joint approach on the matter with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. I look forward to progressing that approach further in the coming months.

Mark Griffin: The minister has also agreed to place a duty to maximise incomes on the new social security agency and has said that she wants to place the emphasis on the devolved Scottish system. Surely, there should be a no-wrong-door approach in Scotland. It is in the interests of the Government and the agency to set a target to increase the uptake of benefits across all areas of responsibility—reserved, devolved and local.

Jeane Freeman: We can set a target for the uptake of benefits only if we have a baseline from which to start. However, as Mr Griffin and members throughout the chamber know, unfortunately, the United Kingdom Government's Department for Work and Pensions does not collect that data, so we are a bit stuck in setting the baseline from which we might move on to a target.

I also gently make the point that, given that today is our last day before the festive recess, our colleagues in the Labour party might do better to turn their attention to the United Kingdom Government's failure to mount a benefits uptake campaign rather than presume that the Scottish Government will continue to pick up the mess and fill the gaps that the UK Government's policies continue to cause for our citizens. It might be more effective if Labour members were to join us in ensuring that our Conservative colleagues at Holyrood and Westminster understand the damage that they are causing and their responsibility to make redress.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Graduate Teachers Programme

1. Ruth Davidson (Edinburgh Central) (Con):

I offer the best wishes of the season to you, Presiding Officer, to everyone in Parliament and to people at home, for a very happy Christmas.

On 28 June 2016, the Scottish Government's delivery plan for Scottish education promised a new specialist programme to recruit high-quality graduates into priority teaching subjects. It was to be in place by summer 2017. Can the First Minister say how many graduates that programme has recruited?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I, too, wish the Presiding Officer, members of Parliament and people across Scotland a very merry Christmas and best wishes for the new year.

As Ruth Davidson is aware, the Government is taking a range of actions to encourage more teachers in general into the profession. The most recent statistics show that, over the past year, more than 500 additional teachers have come into teaching. We are also taking steps to attract teachers into particular subjects. That is why, a matter of months ago, the Deputy First Minister announced incentive schemes to attract teachers into STEM—science, technology, engineering and maths—subjects, for example.

We will continue to take a range of actions alongside the governance reforms and the actions to increase transparency around the performance of our schools, to ensure that we are driving up standards and closing the attainment gap.

Ruth Davidson: I specifically asked the First Minister about her flagship specialist graduate teacher programme, which she announced last June. I asked her how many graduates the programme had recruited. The answer, which we did not hear from the First Minister, is zero, because the scheme has not even been set up yet.

I am holding a copy of the "2018 National Improvement Framework and Improvement Plan", which was published last week. It is Scottish education's report card. On page 52, it clearly states that the Government has missed the deadline for its specialist graduate recruitment programme and we are barely at tender stage. The programme, which was announced in 2016, was due to be delivered by 2017, but it is still not in place as we head towards 2018.

We were also promised, for June 2017, a new standards framework to improve the schools

inspection regime. Can the First Minister tell us whether that promise has been met?

The First Minister: As I am sure Ruth Davidson is aware, a range of new routes into the teaching profession have been made available. By the end of January 2018, it is expected that about 280 students will be studying on one of the 11 new routes into teaching. There has been a 7.5 per cent increase in the overall number of student teachers this year and that builds on a 19 per cent increase in 2016. As I said in my first answer, we also recently launched the £20,000 STEM bursaries for career changers, to attract teachers into particular subjects. We are taking a range of actions.

As Ruth Davidson is also aware, we are taking a range of actions through the national improvement framework to ensure that there is a focus on improvement in our education system. Inspections have a crucial part to play, but a wider range of actions underpin our ambitions in that area.

Ruth Davidson: Under the Scottish National Party, teacher numbers are down by 3,500 and the First Minister's flagship programme has not been delivered. Only this First Minister could come to the chamber and try to claim that as some sort of success.

In her second bite at the recruitment cherry, the First Minister completely missed the question that I had asked her, which was about a promised new standards framework for school inspections that was due to be delivered by 2017. That has not been delivered and we do not know when it will be.

Let us stick with some broken education promises. Everyone knows that good school leadership is crucial to achieving a good education. Even the SNP acknowledges that point, which is why the Government promised to publish a national action plan to get more teachers to take the step up from classroom teacher to headteacher—all the more important as so many headteachers are nearing retirement. The action plan was supposed to be in place by June 2017. Where is it?

The First Minister: If Ruth Davidson took the time to look at those things in detail, she would know, for example, that the Government is working with Columba 1400 and funding the headteachers leadership academy. Large numbers of teachers and headteachers are going through that programme. We have a range of initiatives to support leadership in Scottish education, and we have the highest number of teachers working in our education system since 2011. The number of school inspections has increased over the past year, and that number will increase even further over the year ahead.

The Government is taking a range of actions across all these issues to improve standards in our schools and we are seeing the outcomes of that across a range of areas, not least in the increase in teacher numbers—I have now, I think, mentioned that three times in the course of this exchange, but I have not heard Ruth Davidson acknowledge it even once.

Ruth Davidson: Let us cut through the back and forth between the First Minister and me and look at what the improvement framework—the scorecard—says about that. Not only has the deadline for publishing the action plan on headteachers been missed, apparently the First Minister cannot tell us when it will be published. We have a delayed scheme to get more graduates into teaching, a drive to boost inspections that we are still waiting for, and a plan to get more teachers to become heads that appears to have been shelved. That is just the tip of the iceberg. If we go through—and we have—all 75 actions that the Government promised for education last year, we see that fully a third of the commitments have been delayed, diverted or ducked.

This week, it has been confirmed again how tough things are out there, with some schools having to shorten the school day because they do not have enough staff.

Famously, the First Minister started this year again insisting that education would be her number 1 priority. At the end of the year, does she really think that it looks that way?

The First Minister: Yes, I do. Let me recap. Over the past year, more than 500 additional teachers have gone into education, which takes us to the highest level of teachers in our schools since 2011. As I said earlier, because of the 11 new routes into teaching, we will have an additional 280 students in teaching by the end of January. I have mentioned the bursary scheme to attract teachers into STEM subjects and have spoken about the headteachers leadership programme. We are a Government that is taking a range of actions to improve education and close the attainment gap.

It should be remembered of course that, if we were to follow the Conservatives' advice, particularly on budgetary matters, we would have to take out of the draft budget that was published last week £500 million over and above the cuts that are already being imposed by the chancellor. That would not only wipe out the planned increase for the health service but wipe out most of the pupil equity fund. That is the reality. We are taking action and putting investment into education, and that will deliver results.

Draft Budget

2. Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): I wish the Presiding Officer, members of the Scottish Parliament and the people who send us here a very merry Christmas and a peaceful 2018.

One week on from the publication of the Government's draft budget, we now know that lifeline local services, local jobs and local wages are being hammered yet again by the Scottish National Party Government. We also know that, under the Scottish National Party, the Scottish Fiscal Commission forecasts that our Scottish economy will face "subdued" and "sluggish" economic growth, "slow" productivity growth and "slowing" employment growth for the rest of this session. Is the Scottish Fiscal Commission simply talking Scotland down?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Our budget is based on the estimates and the forecasts of the Scottish Fiscal Commission. Interestingly, the forecasts that the Scottish Fiscal Commission make around growth are based, among other things, on two key factors. The first of those factors is Brexit—I see that the Tories do not like that—and the second is concerns about lack of population growth. If Richard Leonard is concerned about those things, as he should be and as I am, that makes it all the more strange that he has appointed a Brexiteer as his Brexit spokesperson, when he should be getting behind this Government to argue for continued single market membership.

It would also make a lot of sense for Richard Leonard to back this Government in calling for greater powers over immigration for this Parliament, so that we can focus on growing the Scottish population and do not find ourselves at the mercy of the anti-immigration rhetoric and policies of the Conservative Government.

There may be some common ground that we can develop if Richard Leonard is prepared to have the courage of his convictions, or what at least I hope would be his convictions.

Richard Leonard: The Scottish Fiscal Commission's prognosis for the Scottish economy is not just based on Brexit. It is based on oil and gas contraction, low productivity, demography and low private sector investment. No matter how many times ministers say that the fundamentals of our economy are strong, it is clear that they are not. They are weak.

Research and development, as announced yesterday, has grown but is far too narrow, with just 10 businesses accounting for nearly 40 per cent of all new business research and development. Our export base is far too narrow, with just 15 businesses accounting for 30 per cent of all our international exports. We have witnessed

rising levels of bankruptcy, falling levels of business investment and the SNP's own key economic target—raising Scotland's gross domestic product growth to the United Kingdom level by this year—is not met. The target of matching the GDP growth of small independent European Union countries by this year is not met. What will it take—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Please hold on a second, Mr Leonard. Will members please listen to Mr Leonard's question and stop interrupting?

Richard Leonard: My question to the First Minister and to the people on her benches is this: when will she snap out of her complacency? [*Applause.*]

The First Minister: That is a sight that I never thought I would see—Richard Leonard beaming at all the applause that he is getting from his friends on the Tory benches.

Richard Leonard is right on one thing. Scotland's growth rate is not yet matching that of other small, independent countries. I wonder why that is. If Richard Leonard wants to join me in supporting Scotland becoming a small, independent, successful country, I would welcome his conversion.

Let us get back to reality. Right now in Scotland, the unemployment rate is close to an all-time low, and the employment rate is close to an all-time high. Richard Leonard mentioned business research and development. We have now seen that exceed £1 billion for the first time. Growth in business research and development is outstripping that across the rest of the UK. We have closed the productivity gap with the rest of the UK, although we need to close it with our other European competitors as well.

That is why the budget that Derek Mackay set out last week included so many initiatives to support economic growth, from the initiatives to make sure that we are the most competitive part of the UK on business rates to the initiative to capitalise a new national investment bank, to increase even further investment in research and development.

If Richard Leonard does not think that all that goes far enough, here is an invitation to him: between now and the next stage of the budget, Richard Leonard and Labour should come forward and tell us what further investments they want us to make in the economy. That would be a novelty for the Scottish Labour Party.

Richard Leonard: Beyond all the rhetoric and oratory—[*Interruption.*] Beyond all the rhetoric and oratory of the First Minister, there is the loss of real jobs in the real world. If things are so good,

the First Minister should try telling that to the workers of the Airdrie Savings Bank, of RBS and of Kwik-Fit Insurance Services. She should try telling that to the workers of Doosan Babcock, of Ethicon and of Tannoy, who have lost their jobs this year.

The First Minister should also try telling that to the workers at Amazon, who it is reported today are being forced to meet unrealistic targets this Christmas, to try to avoid redundancy in the new year. This is a company to which the First Minister handed over millions of pounds of taxpayers' money—[*Interruption.*] She should be laying down the rules.

What Scotland's economy needs is real and radical change. It needs a Government with an industrial strategy to stimulate growth, and it needs a Government that is prepared to stand up to big business. Will the First Minister accept, once and for all, that she is presiding over an economy that is not serving the people of Scotland? Will she accept that the people of Scotland demand real, radical and urgent change to her economic strategy?

The First Minister: It is hard to know where to start after all that, but it is good to see Richard Leonard enter so enthusiastically into the spirit of the pantomime season in his question.

Let me try to insert a few facts into the debate that we are having. First, the last Labour Administration gave Amazon more money than this Administration has done—that is fact 1. Fact 2: Richard Leonard talked about RBS and Airdrie Savings Bank, which are important institutions, but has it really escaped his notice that, just like the regulation of employment and most of the macro powers over the economy, banking regulation is reserved to the United Kingdom Government and is not a responsibility of the Scottish Government?

Has it also escaped Richard Leonard's notice that the unemployment rate in Scotland right now is not just close to a record low but lower than the rate in the rest of the UK? [*Interruption.*] Richard Leonard is shaking his head at that. It is a matter of fact, which he might care to research before he next comes to the chamber.

Despite the limited powers that we have over matters that relate to the economy, this Government always stands up for workers. The member should ask the workers at Dalzell, for example, who would not be in a job right now without the intervention of this Government. He should ask the workers at Ferguson's shipyard, who would not be in a job right now, or the workers of BiFab, who would not be in a job this Christmas without the intervention of this Government—because while Richard Leonard was having wee photo-shoots outside BiFab, I was

making sure that we saved the company from administration and kept the workers in a job.

That is real action, to be compared with the empty rhetoric of Richard Leonard and the Scottish Labour Party.

The Presiding Officer: We have a number of constituency questions.

Cameron House Hotel

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): The First Minister will be aware of the tragic fire at the Cameron House hotel earlier this week. I am sure that she will join me in sending condolences to the families who lost loved ones and in praising our emergency services—the firefighters, police officers and paramedics—who attended, as well as the staff who played a critical role in evacuating the building.

The investigation has yet to start, because the building needs to be made safe, but when it has been completed, will the First Minister ensure that lessons are learned either in practice or, if there is a need, by enhancing building standards regulations?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I thank Jackie Baillie for asking that question and raising an issue that is in all of our minds this week. The tragic fire at Cameron House hotel on the morning of 19 December sadly claimed the lives of two young men, and I convey my deepest condolences to their families and send my thoughts to all those people who have been affected by the tragedy.

The horrific event demonstrates once again how our firefighters so willingly put themselves in the line of danger to assist others on a daily basis, and I know that everyone in the chamber will want to send our grateful thanks to our firefighters and to all the members of our emergency services who responded.

Of course, there will be a thorough investigation into what happened at Cameron House hotel, and it is important that that investigation is allowed to run its course. However, I can give an assurance that the Scottish Government, with our partners—and, indeed, with the owners of the hotel—will make sure that any lessons that emerge from the investigation are learned and fully applied. For now, all of us in the chamber will want to send our thoughts and our condolences to everyone who has been affected by the tragedy. [*Applause.*]

Bellgrove Hotel (Streptococcus Infections)

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I think that the First Minister is familiar with the Bellgrove hotel in my constituency, which is allegedly a private hotel but is in fact a large,

privately run homeless hostel. What is the Government's response to reports that there has been an outbreak of group A streptococcus infections at the Bellgrove hotel?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): First, I understand that the report that there has been an outbreak of necrotising fasciitis is inaccurate, but that the prevalence of group A strep infections is putting residents at risk of that condition, which in itself is, of course, hugely concerning.

It is important to remember that the Bellgrove is not typical of homeless accommodation in Scotland. However, we are working closely with Glasgow City Council on the issue and on improving the service for some of our most vulnerable people. The recently formed homelessness and rough sleeping action group is looking directly at how we can transform services for people who are homeless. In addition, we have established a £50 million ending homelessness together fund, which will run from the start of the next financial year, to help us to drive change and improvement.

Edinburgh's Hogmanay Festival (Unpaid Volunteers)

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): Edinburgh's hogmanay festival attracts visitors from around the world and is one of the highlights of Scotland's cultural calendar. This year, around 300 unpaid volunteers are being hired as hogmanay ambassadors for the event, despite the fact that, in previous years, it was a paid role. The better than zero campaign has described the move as

"using volunteers to 'displace paid work'"

and has threatened to raise a number of tribunal cases against the organisers over the issue.

Does the First Minister agree that we must have greater clarity on the role of volunteers at large-scale events and that volunteers should not be recruited simply as an alternative to employing paid staff?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Yes, I do. The delivery of Edinburgh's hogmanay is a matter for Underbelly, the company that has been contracted to produce the event by the City of Edinburgh Council. I understand that the event will be staffed with 1,700 paid staff.

I have an important point to make about volunteers. We would all agree, I think, that volunteering is a good thing. Volunteers contribute hugely to festivals and major events. That was the case at the 2014 Commonwealth games in Glasgow and earlier this year at the Edinburgh festival. However, those who contribute voluntarily to making such events a success must be treated

fairly and must never be exploited. Volunteers should complement paid professionals in the delivery of an event and should never replace those paid professionals. The value of volunteers should not be used to reduce contract costs.

We expect organisers of major events to work with Volunteer Scotland to ensure that the volunteers are treated fairly; we also expect organisers to follow the charter that Volunteer Scotland and the Scottish Trades Union Congress put in place to strengthen relationships between volunteers and paid staff.

I welcome the fact that all parties in this particular dispute have agreed to get round the table and discuss the matter with Volunteer Scotland. Volunteer Scotland has suspended promotion of the opportunities on its website until the dispute is resolved. I hope that the dispute is resolved quickly and that Edinburgh's hogmanay is the roaring success that we have come to expect.

Economic Regeneration and Green Energy (Hunterston, North Ayrshire)

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): I, too, offer my condolences to those affected by the tragedy at Cameron House, especially at this time of year.

I recently wrote letters to the Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform and to the Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Jobs and Fair Work regarding two important issues to do with the Hunterston site in North Ayrshire. One letter was a constructive proposal for the economic regeneration of the site and the promotion of green energy; the other letter was on the testing of offshore wind turbines.

More than a month later, I am yet to receive a response from either. In the spirit of the festive season, will the First Minister ask her ministers to double check their inboxes before clocking off this afternoon?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I hope that they are not clocking off this afternoon—that is the first thing that I will say. I hope that that is not too much of a disappointment to any of them.

Of course I will check the position with the ministers concerned. I am not aware of the detailed content of the letters, so I am not able to comment in any more detail, but I will ensure that replies are winging their way to the member and will be on his desk, I hope, in the early part of the new year.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services

3. Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Gordon Edwards was on the BBC this week.

Nicola Sturgeon should remember him—I have spoken before about his wait to get mental health treatment. Now he is angry that spending on mental health for young people has fallen in three health boards, despite Nicola Sturgeon telling him that spending would go up and that waiting times would go down. That was not true, was it?

A majority of the First Minister's health boards have failed to meet the basic target. In the past three years, more than 10,000 young people have had their mental health treatment delayed. Can Nicola Sturgeon answer this question for Gordon Edwards? How much longer will young people have to wait before she delivers on her mental health promises?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): First, I will address the issue of spending, because I paid close attention to the reports earlier this week that came from freedom of information requests. When we look into the details, the situation is not quite as it appeared to be in those reports. The data that was reported did not compare like with like: for example, it compared actual child and adolescent mental health services expenditure in 2016-17 with budgeted CAMHS expenditure for 2017-18. As members will be aware, those are not comparable figures because, for a variety of reasons, boards will spend more in-year than they originally budget for.

Let us look at one of the boards—NHS Lothian—that was cited in the reports. If we examine actual expenditure in this financial year to date—April to November—and compare it with the same period last year, we see that there has been no reduction. Instead, we see that actual NHS Lothian CAMHS expenditure has increased by 6 per cent. There is an important point of detail—*[Interruption.]* Willie Rennie is saying something from a sedentary position, but I am trying to give him a detailed answer to the very important questions that he asked.

The Government and the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport have made it very clear that we have much more work to do to reduce waiting times for mental health treatment to levels that I would consider to be the acceptable levels that we want. That is why we are investing record sums of money in mental health and it is why the number of staff who work in mental health services is increasing. That work will continue until no young people wait longer than we want for the mental health treatment that they need.

Willie Rennie: I am disappointed with Nicola Sturgeon's answer: her excuses will not hide the Government's failings on mental health. Nicola Sturgeon promised that things would get better, but they have got worse. Her ministers delayed the mental health strategy, her ministers delayed millions of pounds of investment, her ministers

delayed the suicide prevention plan, and I have now discovered that an important part of the workforce recruitment plan has been delayed by her ministers, as well.

Delay, delay, delay while young people have to wait, wait, and wait. Can Nicola Sturgeon tell us whether she is proud of her record on mental health?

The First Minister: We will continue to do the work that is required to deliver the mental health services that not just young people, but everybody across our society, have the right to expect.

I appreciate that Willie Rennie is seeking to make a particular point. Anybody who was listening fairly to my last answer would not have heard me make excuses. They would have heard me point out some important facts—it is important that the public have facts about such things—but they would also have heard me acknowledge that we have more work to do. Some of what Willie Rennie said was a mischaracterisation of reality.

Let us take the mental health strategy, for example, which Willie Rennie and I have had exchanges about in the past. The strategy was delayed at the request of the Health and Sport Committee of this Parliament because it wanted more time to contribute to it. It is important in all matters, but particularly in this, that we have a strategy that has the support of the people who work on the front line.

We all know about the pressures on mental health services. More people are coming forward for treatment because of the reduction in stigma, but that places on our shoulders an even bigger responsibility to ensure that we can meet demand. That is why we are investing record sums, why there are record numbers of people working in mental health and why we will continue to get on with the work that needs to be done to ensure that we deliver the mental health services that people have the right to expect.

Parcel Delivery Surcharges

Richard Lochhead (Moray) (SNP): The First Minister may recall that this time last year I first raised the impact of parcel delivery surcharges on customers in Moray and the north of Scotland. Since then, Scottish and United Kingdom ministers and others, including the Advertising Standards Authority, have pledged to act.

Will the First Minister join me in urging the Scrooge-like UK retailers who continue to discriminate against many parts of Scotland to ensure that this is the last Christmas when customers are ripped off, especially given that we now know that Scotland is paying an extra £36 million in surcharges? Given that Santa Claus will be delivering presents free of charge to all parts of

Scotland, I wish the First Minister a prosperous Christmas and thank her for all her hard work in 2017.

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I thank Richard Lochhead and reciprocate those sentiments.

This is a serious matter; I pay tribute to Richard Lochhead for the fantastic work that he has been doing to raise awareness about it. It is deeply unfair that customers across the north of Scotland in particular still face disproportionate delivery costs when buying online. We have seen this week that the amount is to the tune of an extra £36 million in delivery surcharges. Of course, regulation of prices for parcels is reserved to the UK Government, which should take action. I welcome the recent increased attention to the issue, which is undoubtedly a direct result of Richard Lochhead's campaign. Let us hope that we see concrete action from the UK Government soon, and that this is the last Christmas when consumers in the north of Scotland are so blatantly ripped off in that unacceptable manner.

Road Safety

4. Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government is doing to promote road safety over the festive period. (S5F-01859)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): The Scottish Government works with a broad range of partners all year round to promote road safety. Over and above that, there is a host of specific initiatives during the festive period, including Police Scotland's drink/drug drive campaign, which is now under way. Gritters will be available 24/7 to deal with ice and snow, and we have in place the necessary salt stocks—nearly 0.5 million tonnes, which equates to 140 per cent of the amount of salt that was used last winter. In addition, Transport Scotland's multi-agency response team will be convened periodically to monitor conditions and keep the travelling public informed.

Stuart McMillan: This time of year is particularly challenging for our emergency services. Does the First Minister agree that prevention is always better than cure? Whether it is continual messages about drink-driving or roads being mended timeously, the Scottish Government should never stand still and should consider fully how it can best work with all partner agencies to improve road safety throughout the country.

The First Minister: Yes. Stuart McMillan has made an important point. In 2013 we reduced the drink-drive limit in order to send the clear message that drinking and driving is unacceptable and is simply not worth the risk. We did that with the aim

of changing behaviour and preventing drink-driving from ruining lives. Over the festive period, our excellent relationship with all the partners, including local government, will be key to delivering the road safety framework. I am sure that all members wish to pay tribute to all the people who work tirelessly to keep our roads and transport infrastructure operating and safe at this time of year.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): On safety over the festive period, I make a plea for gritting of icy pavements. It would not cost an arm and a leg but—speaking of which—it would reduce unscheduled visits to accident and emergency departments.

The First Minister: We have seen an increase in orthopaedic trauma cases attending our accident and emergency services over the past week or so due to the icy conditions, so Christine Grahame raises an extremely important issue. The weather, particularly at this time of year, can make footpaths difficult, which is why there are measures in place. The salt stocks that I mentioned in my previous answer include the salt stocks that are held by local authorities and trunk road operating companies, and the stock that is held in strategic reserve. The Scottish Government, as the trunk roads authority, is responsible for taking steps to prevent snow and ice endangering the safe passage of pedestrians and vehicles on public roads. Scotland's councils have comparable duties for local roads, which includes all footways, footpaths and cycle paths.

Child Sexual Abuse (Referrals)

5. Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to figures from the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children Scotland, which suggest that there has been a 42 per cent increase in child sexual abuse referrals in the last year. (S5F-01853)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): All children should grow up free from the risk of abuse. Those statistics highlight that there is more for all of us to do to keep our young people safe. The NSPCC indicates that the rise in referrals might reflect greater awareness of the risk posed to children and the need to take action in response. It might also be due to a greater willingness by children who have been sexually abused to tell someone what has happened to them. That suggests that victims of abuse now have greater confidence that they will be listened to and that appropriate action will be taken by agencies and professionals.

We are of course all responsible for protecting children and I urge anyone who is worried about a

child perhaps being abused to report their concerns to the police.

Alexander Stewart: Research carried out by the NSPCC found that there are at least 14 local authority areas across Scotland in which there are no services for child victims of sexual abuse. As we approach the year of young people, will the First Minister commit to ensuring that all child victims of sexual abuse in Scotland will have adequate access to the specialist recovery services that they require?

The First Minister: It is vital that all children have access to the specialist services that they require. In light of the member's questions, I will discuss the issue further with the relevant ministers to see whether the Government should be taking more action in partnership with local authorities to improve the availability of those services.

When we see increases in statistics of this type, we can and should see it as something of concern—it is of deep concern—but we should also be aware that what often lies behind such an increase is an increase in awareness and people feeling more able to come forward. We should encourage that, but, as the member rightly said, when we encourage people to come forward, we must make sure that the services are there to support them when they do.

Rogue Moneylenders

6. Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Government is taking to protect vulnerable people from rogue moneylenders over the festive period. (S5F-01875)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Illegal moneylending will not be tolerated in Scotland at this time of year or at any other time of year. We fully support the Scottish illegal money lending unit, which is hosted by the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities in its drive to investigate and prosecute those who prey on vulnerable people in this way.

We are also working hard to raise the profile of credit unions, which provide ethical and affordable financial services for those who need them. In addition, we provided around £21 million of funding for advice projects last year, helping people to seek solutions in a range of areas, including money and debt.

If any member of the public has any information on illegal moneylenders, they can report it in confidence via the Trading Standards Scotland website.

Pauline McNeill: Despite the excellent work done by Trading Standards Scotland and Police

Scotland, rogue lenders are still slipping through the net and they continue to wreak havoc in some of Scotland's most deprived communities. Evidence collated by those organisations shows that some of the methods used include intimidation and the demanding of sexual favours.

I welcome what the First Minister has said today, and previously, about the role of credit unions. Will she consider having a higher-profile public information campaign, particularly in such communities, that might talk about their existence and importance? Does she agree that that might protect more families from such criminals?

The First Minister: Yes, I do agree. We will carefully consider any proposals to highlight further the important role that credit unions play. They provide financial services to a range of customers and they are a very valuable option for many, including those facing financial exclusion. We are already implementing the credit union working group's recommendations that were published last year. They include making available to credit unions £300,000 to develop junior savers' schemes and working with the sector to design a national awareness-raising campaign that will be delivered during 2018. I hope that members right across the chamber will get behind that campaign.

Seasonal Working

7. Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands)

(Con): To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Government takes to acknowledge seasonal workers and companies that operate over the festive season. (S5F-01852)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): We value very highly the contribution that temporary seasonal workers make to our economy throughout the year. I am particularly happy to acknowledge the hard work and sacrifices of those who work at this time of year to ensure that the rest of us can enjoy the festive period with our families.

Of course, the United Kingdom Government's position on migration post-Brexit is likely to have a major impact on the availability of labour. That is one of the many reasons for our lobbying so hard to maintain single market membership. I am also determined that, should the UK Government continue down its hard Brexit route, the rights of all workers, including those in precarious employment, will be not only protected, but enhanced, to help us to deliver a fairer Scotland.

Edward Mountain: I thank the First Minister for that answer. Let us see whether we can get back on track.

There will, of course, be many other people working over the Christmas period, such as those in the health sector, the police force and the fire

brigade and those who keep our roads and other services working. There will also be those who will be away from their families at Christmas, such as our servicemen and women. While they might not all be in conflict zones, many will remain on call to respond to events in our increasingly dangerous world. Will the First Minister, on behalf of us all, wish them all a very happy Christmas and thank them for all that they do on our behalf?

The First Minister: In the spirit of consensus, yes, I will.

There are many people working across our economy who, unlike the rest of us, will not spend Christmas day and the rest of the holiday period with their families, because they will be working or will be on call, such as people in our emergency services and our hospitality sector and people who keep the transport system moving, to name but a few. We owe them all a debt of gratitude. Let me take this opportunity to thank them from the bottom of my heart for all that they do, and to wish them—and everybody across the country—a very happy Christmas.

The Presiding Officer: On that very nice note, I bring First Minister's question time to an end. I too wish all members, all our visitors in the chamber today and everyone we try to represent across Scotland a very merry Christmas and a happy and peaceful new year.

Meeting closed at 12:43.

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